Domestic dilemmas

All couples or families experience troubles and conflict from to time-to-time. Conflict in and of itself is not a problem, however, the way in which couples and families resolve conflict can be problematic. Signs of problematic conflict resolution range in severity and vary from those couples or families who frequently find themselves in arguments and laying blame, to those that stop discussing issues all together as a means of avoiding conflict. Fortunately, professional counselling can help couples and families develop productive strategies for resolving conflict.

Conflicts occur at all stages of couple or family relationships, and often occur over some of life's most central challenges. managing money and raising children.

In this article we will look at some of the conflicts that many couples and families experience around couples and families.

Managing Money

Holding differing opinions on. what to spend money on, how much to spend, how much to save, and how "disposable" income is divided up amongst partners can create conflict nearly every time a decision regarding money needs to be made. When differences prevail, partners may regularly criticize each other about spending habits or go out of their way to keep spending secrets from one another.

Productive strategies. To minimize differences, it can be helpful to set priorities through planning in advance how money will be managed. A clearly outlined budget is an excellent tool for pre-determining what, when, how, and why money will be handled, and by whom it will be handled by. For those who find the notion of a budget "too restrictive," defining some guiding principles or rules can lessen the likelihood of conflict. Guidelines need to be developed in response to the unique struggles a couple is experiencing. Some examples of guidelines are—one partner manages expenses related to household repairs while another manages insurance needs; major purchases over "X" dollars will be discussed and mutually decided upon; "X" dollars per month are available to each partner for "no questions asked" purchases.

Seeking assistance. Resolving money matters is not a straightforward task for most couples. Seeking professional assistance can pave the way for establishing a framework for effectively handling money conflicts when they arise. A counsellor can assist couples by helping them clarify their individual values and beliefs regarding what money means to them, and how these beliefs are underlying their struggles. A financial counsellor has the specialized expertise to provide couples with a range of practical money management solutions that they may not arrive at on their own.

Raising Children

Child rearing presents parents and caregivers with both significant rewards, and sometimes overwhelming challenges at each stage of a child's development. With children getting into their own battles and competing for parental attention, family life can often feel stressful and chaotic. Demands of work, financial pressures, and trying to keep up with household tasks often heighten the stress of parenting.

When parents hold different parenting views, such as the common situation where one parent is seen as too easy going and the other as "too strict and rule bound;" conflict will often occur.

Productive strategies. It is not necessary that parents or caregivers always agree on how to manage every parenting situation, however, it can be very helpful to discuss and agree upon some basic rules and expectations of children. When situations arise that are not addressed by the rules, it is helpful to focus on coming up with a solution geared at serving the best interests of the child. Giving children a unified solution on a given situation will minimize confusion for the child and the opportunity for conflict between parents.

Seeking assistance. Parenting challenges and family problems are inescapable. Most often, families are able to resolve day to day challenges and are stronger and closer as a result. However, when a family problem

persists, or when efforts to resolve the problem are not getting the desired results, families are encouraged to seek the assistance of a professional counsellor. Counsellors deal with a wide range of family and parenting issues and can assist by helping a family explore practical strategies for resolving problems. They can also assist by identifying community resources such as parenting classes and support groups.

Should family or couple problems of any sort escalate to the point where violence ensues, families are urged to seek professional assistance as early as possible as the likelihood of reoccurrence is high when alternative problem solving strategies are not available.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a serious problem impacting people from all backgrounds, ages, and income levels. Because incidences of family violence are often shrouded in secrecy, the prevalence and catastrophic impact are not well known by the general public. Studies have reported that in North America a woman is abused every 15 seconds; domestic murders represent some 30 per cent of all murders; children who observe abuse in their family of origin often demonstrate abusive behaviour as adults; female teens today are more tolerant of abusive behaviour from their boyfriends than their mother's generation due to increased peer pressure to have a partner. These studies portray a grim picture but can serve as a message to those that are experiencing abuse that they are not alone in their plight and to society that we must open the door for both victims of abuse and perpetrators to get the professional help that they need.

Opening the Door Through Understanding

Abusive behaviour is generally understood to serve the purpose of maintaining control over another individual, and can take many forms: physical acts such as hitting, kicking, punching, forcing sexual contact, destroying property; emotional tormenting through comments that belittle or those that instil fear through threatening to do harm to the individual or to their children; economic restrictions such as withholding money or keeping a partner from having a job; controlling who the victim sees, where they go or who they talk to on the phone.

Domestic violence tends to follow a predictable cycle beginning with a slow escalation of anger expressed towards the victim usually in the form of threats followed by an intense outburst of physical violence; the final stage is often referred to as the honeymoon stage, where the abuser behaves in a kind and loving way towards the victim, often expressing feelings of shame, then promising that the violence will not happen again. The abuse cycle then most often repeats itself with many families caught in a never-ending cycle of abuse.

People who have not been exposed to family violence will often ask the question—why doesn't the victim leave? However, for the victim it is usually not an easy option to pursue without assistance. Not having a safe place to turn to or the economic means to leave and support children are major obstacles for most victims. The effects of abuse leave many victims lacking the confidence they need to act on solutions they very well may know to be the best thing for them. Still many others continue to love their partners in spite of their abuse, and live with the hope that things will improve.

Even though there may be significant periods of time when things are going smoothly for the family, it is important for victims of abuse to develop a plan to ensure safety for themselves and their children. Some elements of a safety plan are: telling a trusted friend or family member about the situation of abuse; educating children on how and when to call police; finding somewhere to go to if violence occurs such as a domestic violence shelter or the home of a friend unknown to the abuser.